

The Banana

Tonight, after serving Malayan coconut chicken with ginger, peppers, and curry, I served a culturally compatible desert, which is also the cheapest desert in the world. I baked the bananas till their blackened skin told me they were done, then peeled and split them in half, right on the serving plates. Then sprinkled some rum on them, and vanilla sugar, made two lines of honey, and covered them with whipped cream. We licked our eager lips for about twenty five cents per serving, labor and transport from the original “Banana Republic” Honduras included. Bananas. How plebeian!

But exactly sixty years ago, in Prague, Fall of 1945, the banana was the highbrow star performer in a different and more interesting dramatic spectacle.

The five years long war just ended, but the battle in the kitchen to feed the family continued still, with undiminished ferocity. There were no victories - just draws, with boiled potatoes overlaid with cottage cheese and parsley, mashed potatoes with egg fried on lard, potatoes mashed with boiled barley and garlic, fried mashed potato balls, potato soups...

I was an eight year old girl with a growling stomach, as skinny and pale as all the girls in Prague, but with a brain succulent with information storage capacity, and endowed with curiosity and eagerness to sponge up the data about the world around me, more like a black hole sucking in the Universe than the common sponge. I had known only the life in war and thought the war was normal way of existence for us, but in secret I suspected there was a different life elsewhere, certainly in the tropics. I reread “Orchid Hunter” from my father’s library, the illustrated tome about Borneo, the island abounding with amazing orchids with names like *spectabile*, *nobile*, *formosa* and *grandiflora*. There were palms with thorns there, violin birds, jewel beetles, enormous insect eating plants, the jungles were inhabited by cannibalistic Dayaks and orang-utan, the “man of the woods”, who Dayaks thought to be a true man, but the one who does not speak to avoid working. I did not understand some of the writing but I liked this incomprehension - for me it was a promise of future discoveries.

Such as the uncovering of banana.

When Mrs. Benesova, our art teacher, entered the classroom we suspected an unusual event. She marched to her desk with the determination of someone who is on a mission, her steps high, her gaze into the distance. The class calmed down without the habitual teacher's insistence.

"Children," she said and that was all. We thought it odd. She looked at us intently, for a while, then opened her purse and withdrew a strange object. She held the thing between her forefinger and thumb by its stem and lifted it up above her head as if to make it unreachable.

"Children ... banana!" All of us gazed at the slightly curved yellow object above her head with open mouth and in silence. Even Franta Kacidl.

"This famous tropical fruit, *musa paradisiaca*, grows on gigantic herbs with treelike stems. These stems die and disintegrate - after flowering and delivering this fruit..." she swayed the banana with a loose wrist as one would ring a bell "... this fruit with aromatic edible flesh." Kacidl said "ding- dong- ding- dong," but nobody laughed.

Mrs. Benesova continued undeterred, after she laid the fruit on the desk. She lowered her voice: "Bisexual plant: male flowers are always on the top of the flowering stem and those of the female sex are on the bottom." Sykorova, who was the oldest of the class (because she was delayed in the first grade and then flunked,) burst in a short giggle. Stupid Vokurka said "whoa." *Musa paradisiaca* - it sounded beautiful to me, like a secret sacred mantra. And I found it fascinating to hear about sex, delivery and death, all happening in paradise, and all in just two sentences.

The teacher instructed us to form a queue, starting the file from the first bench on the left. Then she spread a clean handkerchief on her desk, peeled the banana and opened her pen knife called "rybka." She motioned for the first pupil in the queue to approach. Sasha Shultzova looked daunted but stepped up to the desk. Mrs. Benesova cut a slice of the off-white flesh of the fruit and pointed at it as it lay on the kerchief, glistening with wetness. She had to prod Sasha again to take it and put it in her mouth. Sasha did not bite or swallow it, she closed her lips tight like a child refusing a dentist, and sleepwalked away with a smile, as if blessed. Everybody watched her intently with unrevealed

thoughts, and since thoughts are silent there was a silence in the classroom. After this Communion Sasha's eyes were almost closed and her beam unfading.

The teacher dissected the banana into thirty two quarter inch thick pieces, one for each pupil of the second grade Class B, each of the segments a slice of indelible memory for thirty two children, who approached the desk in discipline, to receive.

I remember well how it melted slowly on my tongue as I refused to swallow the dissolved matter to prolong the unprecedented delight. And I wished this tropical ambrosia would have been just potatoes for my favorite Dayaks, and orangutans, too, and I felt to understand my Borneo of fables better now. The promised paradise of musa.

The unholy Host I just received was a promise to me of glorious times to come, now, when the war of adults was over.